

CHAPTER XIII. MISS LETITIA.

Emily entered the room. The door was immediately closed on her from the outer side. Mrs. Ellmother's heavy steps were heard retreating along the passage. Then the banging of the door that led into the kitchen shook the flimsily-built cottage. Then, there was silence.

The dim light of a lamp hidden away in a corner and screened by a dingy green shade, just revealed the closely-curtained bed, and the table near it bearing medicine-bottles and glasses. The only objects on the chimney-piece were a clock that had been stopped in mercy to the sufferer's irritable nerves, and an open case containing a machine for pouring drops into the eyes. The smell of fumigating pastilles hung heavily on the air. To Emily's excited imagination, the silence was like the silence of death. She approached the bed trembling. "Won't you speak to me, aunt?"

"Is that you, Emily? Who let you come in?"

"You said I might come in, dear. Are you thirsty? I see some lemonade on the table. Shall I give it to you?"

"No! If you open the bed-curtains, you let in the light. My poor eyes! Why are you here, my dear? Why are you not at the school?"

"It's holiday-time, aunt. Besides, I have left school for good."

"Left school?" Miss Letitia's memory made an effort, as she repeated those words. "You were going somewhere when you left school," she said, "and Cecilia Wyvil had something to do with it. Oh, my love, how cruel of you to go away to a stranger, when you might live here with me!" She paused--her sense of what she had herself just said began to grow confused. "What stranger?" she asked abruptly. "Was it a man? What name? Oh, my mind! Has death got hold of my mind before my body?"

"Hush! hush! I'll tell you the name. Sir Jervis Redwood."

"I don't know him. I don't want to know him. Do you think he means to send for you. Perhaps he has sent for you. I won't allow it! You shan't go!"

"Don't excite yourself, dear! I have refused to go; I mean to stay here with you."

The fevered brain held to its last idea. "Has he sent for you?" she said again, louder than before.

Emily replied once more, in terms carefully chosen with the one purpose of pacifying her. The attempt proved to be useless, and worse--it seemed to make her suspicious. "I won't be deceived!" she said; "I mean to know all about it. He did send for you. Whom did he send?"

"His housekeeper."

"What name?" The tone in which she put the question told of excitement that was rising to its climax. "Don't you know that I'm curious about names?" she burst out. "Why do you provoke me? Who is it?"

"Nobody you know, or need care about, dear aunt. Mrs. Rook."

Instantly on the utterance of that name, there followed an unexpected result. Silence ensued.

Emily waited--hesitated--advanced, to part the curtains, and look in at her aunt. She was stopped by a dreadful sound of laughter--the cheerless laughter that is heard among the mad. It suddenly ended in a dreary sigh.

Afraid to look in, she spoke, hardly knowing what she said. "Is there anything you wish for? Shall I call--?"

Miss Letitia's voice interrupted her. Dull, low, rapidly muttering, it was unlike, shockingly unlike, the familiar voice of her aunt. It said strange words.

"Mrs. Rook? What does Mrs. Rook matter? Or her husband either? Bony, Bony, you're frightened about nothing. Where's the danger of those two people turning up? Do you know how many miles away the village is? Oh, you fool--a hundred miles and more. Never mind the coroner, the coroner must keep in his own district--and the jury too. A risky deception? I call it a pious fraud. And I have a tender conscience, and a cultivated mind. The newspaper? How is our newspaper to find its way to her, I should like to know? You poor old Bony! Upon my word you do me good--you make me laugh."

The cheerless laughter broke out again--and died away again drearily in a sigh.

Accustomed to decide rapidly in the ordinary emergencies of her life, Emily felt herself painfully embarrassed by the position in which she was now placed.

After what she had already heard, could she reconcile it to her sense of duty to her aunt to remain any longer in the room?

In the hopeless self-betrayal of delirium, Miss Letitia had revealed some act of concealment, committed in her past life, and confided to her faithful old servant. Under these circumstances, had Emily made any discoveries which convicted her of taking a base advantage of her position at the bedside? Most assuredly not! The nature of the act of concealment; the causes that had led to it; the person (or persons) affected by it--these were mysteries which left her entirely in the dark. She had found out that her aunt was acquainted with Mrs. Rook, and that was literally all she knew.

Blameless, so far, in the line of conduct that she had pursued, might she still remain in the bed-chamber--on this distinct understanding with herself: that she would instantly return to the sitting-room if she heard anything which could suggest a doubt of Miss Letitia's claim to her affection and respect? After some hesitation, she decided on leaving it to her conscience to answer that question. Does conscience ever say, No--when inclination says, Yes? Emily's conscience sided with her reluctance to leave her aunt.

Throughout the time occupied by these reflections, the silence had remained unbroken. Emily began to feel uneasy. She timidly put her hand through the curtains, and took Miss Letitia's hand. The contact with the burning skin startled her. She turned away to the door, to call the servant--when the sound of her aunt's voice hurried her back to the bed.

"Are you there, Bony?" the voice asked.

Was her mind getting clear again? Emily tried the experiment of making a plain reply. "Your niece is with you," she said. "Shall I call the servant?"

Miss Letitia's mind was still far away from Emily, and from the present time.

"The servant?" she repeated. "All the servants but you, Bony, have been sent away. London's the place for us. No gossiping servants and no curious neighbors in London. Bury the horrid truth in London. Ah, you may well say I look anxious and wretched. I hate deception--and yet, it must be done. Why do you waste time in talking? Why don't you find out where the vile

woman lives? Only let me get at her--and I'll make Sara ashamed of herself."

Emily's heart beat fast when she heard the woman's name. "Sara" (as she and her school-fellows knew) was the baptismal name of Miss Jethro. Had her aunt alluded to the disgraced teacher, or to some other woman?

She waited eagerly to hear more. There was nothing to be heard. At this most interesting moment, the silence remained undisturbed.

In the fervor of her anxiety to set her doubts at rest, Emily's faith in her own good resolutions began to waver. The temptation to say something which might set her aunt talking again was too strong to be resisted--if she remained at the bedside. Despairing of herself she rose and turned to the door. In the moment that passed while she crossed the room the very words occurred to her that would suit her purpose. Her cheeks were hot with shame--she hesitated--she looked back at the bed--the words passed her lips.

"Sara is only one of the woman's names," she said. "Do you like her other name?"

The rapidly-muttering tones broke out again instantly--but not in answer to Emily. The sound of a voice had encouraged Miss Letitia to pursue her own confused train of thought, and had stimulated the fast-failing capacity of speech to exert itself once more.

"No! no! He's too cunning for you, and too cunning for me. He doesn't leave letters about; he destroys them all. Did I say he was too cunning for us? It's false. We are too cunning for him. Who found the morsels of his letter in the basket? Who stuck them together? Ah, we know! Don't read it, Bony. 'Dear Miss Jethro'--don't read it again. 'Miss Jethro' in his letter; and 'Sara,' when he talks to himself in the garden. Oh, who would have believed it of him, if we hadn't seen and heard it ourselves!"

There was no more doubt now.

But who was the man, so bitterly and so regretfully alluded to?

No: this time Emily held firmly by the resolution which bound her to respect the helpless position of her aunt. The speediest way of summoning Mrs. Ellmother would be to ring the bell. As she touched the handle a faint cry of suffering from the bed called her back.

"Oh, so thirsty!" murmured the failing voice--"so thirsty!"

She parted the curtains. The shrouded lamplight just showed her the green shade over Miss Letitia's eyes--the hollow cheeks below it--the arms laid helplessly on the bed-clothes. "Oh, aunt, don't you know my voice? Don't you know Emily? Let me kiss you, dear!" Useless to plead with her; useless to kiss her; she only reiterated the words, "So thirsty! so thirsty!" Emily raised the poor tortured body with a patient caution which spared it pain, and put the glass to her aunt's lips. She drank the lemonade to the last drop. Refreshed for the moment, she spoke again--spoke to the visionary servant of her delirious fancy, while she rested in Emily's arms.

"For God's sake, take care how you answer if she questions you. If she knew what we know! Are men ever ashamed? Ha! the vile woman! the vile woman!"

Her voice, sinking gradually, dropped to a whisper. The next few words that escaped her were muttered inarticulately. Little by little, the false energy of fever was wearing itself out. She lay silent and still. To look at her now was to look at the image of death. Once more, Emily kissed her--closed the curtains--and rang the bell. Mrs. Ellmother failed to appear. Emily left the room to call her.

Arrived at the top of the kitchen stairs, she noted a slight change. The door below, which she had heard banged on first entering her aunt's room, now stood open. She called to Mrs. Ellmother. A strange voice answered her. Its accent was soft and courteous; presenting the strongest imaginable contrast to the harsh tones of Miss Letitia's crabbed old maid.

"Is there anything I can do for you, miss?"

The person making this polite inquiry appeared at the foot of the stairs--a plump and comely woman of middle age. She looked up at the young lady with a pleasant smile.

"I beg your pardon," Emily said; "I had no intention of disturbing you. I called to Mrs. Ellmother."

The stranger advanced a little way up the stairs, and answered, "Mrs. Ellmother is not here."

"Do you expect her back soon?"

"Excuse me, miss--I don't expect her back at all."

"Do you mean to say that she has left the house?"

"Yes, miss. She has left the house."